

Year 9 & 10 Category Runner-up

Fading Light

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The tip of my finger firmly presses the soft pad of the doorbell button. A few seconds pass, and the faded, wooden door swings inward. My Grandad appears in the doorway, a cheeky grin pulling at his lips and that familiar, lively sparkle in his old eyes. Of all people, why him? So many people are affected, yet still there is an immense lack of awareness?

From inside the living room, I hear my Nan's raised voice in the kitchen. "Why haven't you buttered the bread yet?" I listen to the soft sound of Grandad's feet scraping against the carpet as he slowly shuffles toward the kitchen. "You can do better than this, Brian, it's not that hard." He mumbles a "sorry," and I hear Mum sigh. "He can't help it, please have some patience." She means the best, she really does, but it takes a toll on all of us. I start to wonder if maybe his memory problems aren't temporary after all.

The red streaks on the whiteboard disappear as the small cloth glides over them, and a buzz of voices fill my ears like a swarm of bees. My teacher reaches into the empty marker bin and sighs, exasperated. He turns around to see the lone black marker sitting on the desk in front of him. Almost as instinct he mutters,

"Gosh, I must have dementia or something, this is the third time today I've forgotten something!"

My stomach stirs, like a heavy coin tossed into a still pond. I feel nauseous. He doesn't know what it's like. He wouldn't say that if he knew. Knew what my Grandad goes through. What us, his family, go through. A moment so small, yet so significant.

I now notice the small things that actively affect him. His silly dad jokes are escaping his vocabulary, along with them his iconic, old-fashioned phrases that I've picked up over the years. But it's not just memory that impacts his days, it's his newfound short-temperedness, his incessant clumsiness, his confusion.

Through everything, music still paints a path through his life; he loves teaching me the art of the piano, enjoys explaining the process of transcribing songs into sheet music, and proudly shows me the pieces he plays on his cornet for brass band. But over the past couple of years, I've been less inclined to join him and his musical ventures. More engrossed in scrolling aimlessly on social media rather than treasuring the time I have left with him. I feel guilty that I have taken his wellness for granted.

Even now, after so many years, he sits at the old piano, tinkling away at the faded keys as a slightly out-of-tune melody plays. A strange illness it is. Forcing him to forget the simplest of things, like boiling the kettle for a cup of tea or a doctor's appointment, yet it allows him to remember the complex chords, elaborate rhythms, and intricate patterns of the piano.

As the years go on, my heart continues to break as his health slowly deteriorates before me, and I can't bear the thought of losing him someday.

Dementia sucks.

Awareness matters.